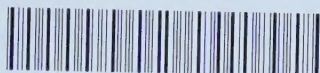


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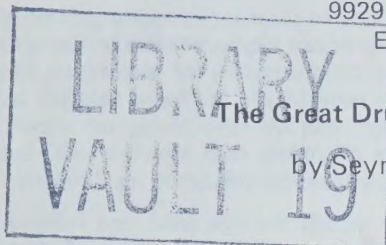
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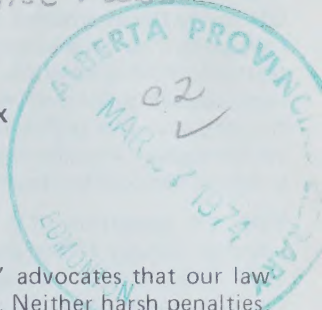
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The Great Drug Education Hoax

by Seymour Halleck



It is now obvious to even the staunchest "law and order" advocates that our law enforcement agencies cannot control the use of illegal drugs. Neither harsh penalties, vigorous police surveillance, nor determined efforts to diminish the flow of drugs into the country have prevented millions of young people from experimenting with pharmaceutical agents alleged to be dangerous. In the light of this inability to control drug usage through legal sanctions, it has become fashionable to turn to "education" as the best method of persuading youth to abstain.

The American people have great faith in education. They have set out to educate our young people about drug abuse with a vengeance. Lectures on drugs have become almost a fixture of the high school and college curriculum. Even sparsely populated communities have appointed committees charged with promoting drug education. Such committees usually set up lectures or forums at which young people and their parents can hear experts discuss the effects and relative dangers of a wide variety of pharmaceutical agents.

Strangely enough, repetitive discussion of drugs does not seem to bore most people. Adults turn out for public meetings in amazing numbers. Even students (whose enthusiasm is perhaps buttressed by their being allowed to miss regular class time) become avid listeners and participants. Community leaders responsible for drug education point proudly to the number of lectures and meetings they have sponsored; many seem to feel that as long as they keep talking about the drug problem, it will be solved.

Despite all this enthusiasm, there is still no way of evaluating whether educating young people about drugs has any effect whatsoever in diminishing drug usage. Accurate data about the incidence of drug experimentation are almost impossible to obtain. People who take drugs illicitly are not going to talk about it too openly, and it is also unlikely that they will be honest or cooperative in responding to survey research. It does seem clear, however, from what little survey information we do have, that even with our educational programs, illegal drug usage has continued to increase.

In view of our uncertainty as to the effectiveness of drug education, it seems to me that it would be prudent to consider two disconcerting possibilities. First, that drug education may not discourage youth from experimenting with illegal drugs. Under certain circumstances, as indicated later, education may even encourage drug usage.

Dr. Halleck is Professor of Psychiatry and Director of Student Psychiatric Services at the University of Wisconsin. This article is reprinted with permission from the Author and from *The Progressive*.

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Second, that drug education programs may be expensive and ineffective distractions which diminish our motivations to examine basic moral and political questions which may be the very roots of the drug problem.

### The Scare Technique

The most prevalent but least effective theme in the drug education program is to "scare the hell out of them." Too often the program consists of one or more meetings at which a local physician, a law enforcement officer, and perhaps a former addict will endlessly catalogue the horrible outcome of drug usage. The physician will exaggerate the degree to which drugs can produce bodily damage. The law enforcement officer will gravely talk about the increasing flow of drugs into the community and will throw in a few anecdotes about young people he has seen ruined by drugs. Sometimes he will even bring in displays of confiscated drugs to show to his presumably horrified audience. The former addict, who is usually the star performer, will recount his sordid experiences as a drug user and will glowingly report the salutary effects of his reformation. It is an interesting show which has much of the flavor of an old-fashioned revival meeting.

Unfortunately, such a biased approach to the drug problem is unlikely to have a positive influence upon young people. The kids know better. A sizeable proportion of high school and college students in the audience have already experimented with marihuana. Many have found this experience to be a pleasant one. Few marihuana users believe that they have been harmed by using the drug. When these young people hear speakers describe marihuana as a narcotic which belongs in the same class as harder drugs, they are understandably skeptical of the speaker's reliability. Since the young person's own experience leads him to believe that the speaker is exaggerating the dangers of marihuana, he wonders if the speaker is not exaggerating the dangers of other drugs as well.

It is also true that those students who have never used illegal drugs usually know somebody who has. Generally the student who does not use drugs hears only favorable reports of their effects from those who do. The non-user also notes that most of his user friends do not seem to be suffering the horrible effects described by the speakers. He is much more likely to be influenced by the opinions of his peers than the opinions of adult speakers.

Even the presence of a youthful former addict on the program does not have much deterrent effect on the audience. Usually the former addict has been addicted to heroin. He is likely to have grown up in an urban ghetto community and his life experiences are unlikely to have been similar to those of most of his audience. The young person in the audience who, as a rule, has never experimented with "hard" drugs has difficulty in identifying with the outlook or experiences of a true addict.

Finally, young people do a great deal of reading about drugs. From my own experience in working with student groups, I am regularly impressed with their knowledge of both the scientific and popular drug literature. Unfortunately, many of the doctors and police officers who participate in the "scare the hell out of them" programs have had neither the motivation nor the time to familiarize themselves with the literature.

Usually, when given a chance to ask questions, the young people in the audience find it easy to embarrass a speaker by quoting studies which contradict the speaker's claims. Nor is it difficult for them to expose the moralistic rather than the factual basis of a speaker's admonitions. Once a speaker's biases and ignorance have been exposed, the younger people in the audience seem to give up. They may continue to confront the speaker but as the meeting goes on it is evident that some are snickering, that others are giving one another knowing glances, and that most are



responding to the meeting with an attitude of supercilious resignation.

### **More Sophisticated Approaches**

As educators become more sophisticated they tend to add participants to their programs who provide more factual knowledge about drugs. Some groups will even allow advocates of more liberal drug usage to participate in the education process. Not infrequently, a knowledgeable pharmacologist or psychiatrist will be allowed to present accurate information concerning the physical and psychological effects of drug usage. Young people seem to have an insatiable demand for such information. They will listen avidly as the lecturer discusses chemical formulas, describes sophisticated scientific studies, and lists esoteric side effects of a wide variety of little known as well as popular drugs.

As one listens to such talks, he finds it hard to keep from wondering why sixteen or seventeen year olds should be so fascinated with pharmacology or psychiatry. It is, after all, hardly essential that teenagers have vast knowledge of the physical and psychological effects of psilocybin, LSD, or DMT. It seems quite unlikely that such extensive knowledge is going to help them make a moral decision on whether they will ingest, inhale, or inject an illegal substance into their bodies. One possible, but ominous, explanation of the young people's interest might be that they are already heavily involved in using drugs; that they are simply trying to get as much information as they can so that they can enjoy the most pleasurable drug experience and be informed on how they might deal with any undesirable reactions.

As the young person listens to factual material about drugs, he comes to appreciate that they are not nearly so dangerous as people generally believe them to be. This is particularly true in the case of marihuana. I have had the experience of lecturing groups about the physical and psychological effects of marihuana and have noted that as long as I present only objective material, and do not raise moral questions, the audience seems to become progressively more enthusiastic about the drug. At least in some instances the factual approach to drug education could encourage rather than discourage experimentation.

### **The Pied Pipers**

If an education program also includes an advocate of drug experimentation, the program is even more likely to have unintended effects. There are many people in our society, including some professionals, who feel that consciousness-altering drugs can produce pleasant, enlightening, and even spiritual experiences. They view some of the drugs, particularly the psychedelics, as agents that many eventually have a highly beneficial influence on man's well-being. Not infrequently, these individuals are charming or charismatic. Drugs are their "thing" and they are likely to know a little more about them than the other speakers.

In the eyes of the youthful audience, these drug advocates are also likely to be people who share the values of the "now" generation and who are quite adept at communicating with the young. In any debate with biased or even cautious advocates of drug control, they are quite likely to exert the greater influence. I have watched scholarly and articulate men debate with some of the "Pied Pipers" of the psychedelic era such as Timothy Leary, and have noted that even if the scholar presents the more telling arguments, he usually loses his audience.

We must also consider the possibility that repeated exposure to any subject may markedly alter our attitudes toward that subject. As illegal drugs are endlessly discussed and rediscussed they become more familiar and perhaps more acceptable to us.

## **Provocative Reporting**

It is conceivable that the plethora of publicity about drug usage, and the abundance of educational meetings held, simply neutralize the negative feelings with which adults view drugs and arouse the curiosity of youth who are prone to experiment and take risks anyway. The problem is compounded by the tendency of the news media to report the proceedings of a drug information program in a provocative manner. The drugs may be described as dangerous but they are also described in a manner that lends them an aura of mystery and excitement. The young person may be thus stimulated to indulge in behavior that not only appears to be "the thing to do" but which also promises to be adventurous.

## **A Help for Parents and Professionals**

Though I have questioned the value of drug education programs in general, I do not mean to suggest that educational programs must, of necessity, be useless or dangerous. They can certainly be helpful to adults. When it comes to holding dialogues with teenage children about the potential dangers of drugs, the average American parent is totally outmatched. For reasons mentioned earlier, his child is likely to have a fund of information and a grasp of the issues which exceeds his own. At the very least, parents who decide to counsel their children about the use of drugs should start out with a knowledge of the facts. It is also important that professionals know about drugs; the family physician, the high school counsellor, the teacher, and the minister quite frequently seem to be as ignorant of the uses and effects of drugs as the ordinary adult.

## **Social and Ethical Issues**

Educational programs might be helpful to young and old alike if they focused on broader social and ethical issues. It would be useful to begin by acknowledging that the abuse of legal drugs, including those prescribed by physicians, is probably a greater problem for our society than abuse of illegal drugs. And abuse of alcohol still creates more mental and physical suffering among our citizens than abuse of other legal drugs.

## **Safety and Morality**

If the drug problem is viewed from a broad perspective, a crucial ethical question for our society is: Which drugs, legal or illegal, are worth using? Which drugs, if any, make life better? Most drugs provide the user with a pleasant experience — for the moment. Conceivably, there may also be drugs which could expand human awareness and provide people with new insights. Whether one uses tobacco, alcohol, marihuana, amphetamines, or heroin, he is searching for something, occasionally for greater awareness but usually for stimulation or relaxation, for a temporary respite from the tedium or stresses of everyday life. If we agree that man is entitled to a certain degree of artificial stimulation or relaxation, it is important to know which drugs do this most effectively and with the greatest safety.

The issue of safety must be considered in basic, honest terms. To begin with, the educator must acknowledge that there is no drug known to mankind that is not dangerous if used to excess. Many of the arguments between generations as to whether the older generation's drug, alcohol, is preferable to the younger generation's drug, marihuana, arise out of the protagonists' failure to define what kind of dosages they are talking about. If one compares the effects of large dosages of alcohol against the effects of small dosages of marihuana, alcohol is obviously the more dangerous drug. However, when purer forms of marihuana are used frequently, marihuana may have as many undesirable side effects as alcohol. Both drugs can also lead to social deterioration.



On the other hand, both drugs can provide man with great pleasure. Society's task is to consider the physical, psychological, and social dangers of each drug and to make moral decisions as to whether the pleasures produced by that drug are worth risking its hazards. Similar kinds of questions are relevant to the use of other drugs such as tobacco, LSD, barbiturates, or the amphetamines. The search for answers to these basic questions could provide a more rational basis for future legislation than the puritanical or evangelistic approaches prevalent now.

Young people as well as their parents could benefit from a careful consideration of the morality of searching for artificial stimulation or tranquillity. There has probably never been a society which has not used some kind of fermented beverage or botanical product to make the pains and outrages of everyday life more tolerable. It would seem that man's existence is so plagued by anxiety, uncertainty, and loneliness that he regularly seeks temporary states of artificial escape. The problem here is that a certain degree of stimulation or tranquillity obviously benefits many people, but too much alteration of consciousness does not bring out the best in man. People need a certain amount of anxiety and frustration to be creative, to make decisions, and even to confront oppressive institutions within our society. If they become too euphoric or too tranquil, they do nothing.

I have noted over several years of watching protests at the University of Wisconsin that activism and drug usage seem to be inversely related. I am not saying that protesters do not use drugs. They frequently do, and for that matter the drug experience may even encourage them to question existing values even more vigorously. What I am saying is that at a time of confrontation, when it is urgent to bring about useful change, a ready availability of drugs in the community seems to diminish the drive to seek change. I have seen dedicated activists become so involved in drug usage that they lost their desire to continue their activism. In their narcotized, peaceful states, such youth may be more tolerable to the "establishment," but their use of drugs has rendered them ineffective as agents of social change.

Even in smaller social relationships, excessive drug usage seems to have a pernicious effect in maintaining an undesirable status quo. I recently counselled a couple who had serious problems with each other. They had many disagreements, different tastes, and, like many other married couples, had devised subtle but elaborate means of keeping each other unhappy. Periodically they would get into an argument and try to consider their differences seriously. They both, however, happened to be heavy marihuana users. Whenever they felt too anxious about their relationship, they would simply "turn on" and their problems would never be resolved. They remained tranquil, but both were chronically depressed over a relationship which would have been made meaningful if they had really confronted each other. Similar kinds of oppressive status quos are probably being maintained in many marital and other social relationships whenever drugs (legal or illegal) are used to narcotize individuals who have problems but who are reluctant to deal with them.

Young people do seem to understand that if the world were peaceful and that if all men were free, drug usage might be a luxury we could easily afford. They can also appreciate that in a world in which there are so many oppressive forces to be dealt with, in which there are so many things that need doing and changing, and in which the joys of creativity still represent one of the most profound of human experiences, excessive search for artificial euphoria might be socially dangerous. I do not know if raising ethical questions about the general problems of artificial euphoria actually discourages young people from using drugs. Certainly such an approach cannot provide any young person with a clear yes-or-no answer on whether he should experiment with a particular drug. It does, however, provide him with an intellectual framework from which he can make a rational decision unbiased by the exaggerated

views of his peers or his parents. And considering the problem of drug usage in basic moral or ethical — and social — terms does seem to minimize the destructive and inane polarization of viewpoints which appears to be an inevitable result of the ordinary drug education program.

Obviously the approach I am advocating would lead to serious questioning of existing laws governing drug usage and distribution. Many of our laws are based on unrealistic fears and misinformation. If we approached the drug problem by recognizing man's need to seek relief and release from a world he never made, by being realistic as to the physical and psychological dangers of drugs, and by considering the extent to which society has the right to control the use of agents that interfere with social progress, we could at least develop a rational basis for recommending legal reform.

With the exception of a few esoteric drugs — which are not used too frequently anyway — most of the drugs which youth currently use have been with us for a long time. Why should young people suddenly turn to drugs now? It is unlikely that youth's innate need for artificial escape has changed. Rather, something about the society must have changed. Many social factors can be invoked to explain the drug problem. There is the generation gap, and the increasing tendency of youth to imitate peers and to derive their values from peers. There is our growing permissiveness and our willingness to tolerate new kinds of social experimentation. There is our tendency to search for meaning in an era in which past values are losing their relevance. And most of all, there is despair.

Perhaps the best explanation for the growing use of drugs in this country is that we are an unhappy society. It makes little difference whether one is talking about young people who use illegal drugs or older people who use legal drugs. In our frustration, our anxiety, our fear, our boredom, and our purposelessness, we all use too many drugs. Our affluence and leisure do not bring us happiness. Our failure to deal with urgent problems such as the rapid rate of technological change, over-population, pollution, or the war in Vietnam leaves us feeling frustrated and impotent. The younger generation seems especially desperate. They fear the future, distrust the past as a guide to the future, and are relentlessly trying to live in the moment. The drug experience heightens their sense of the present and enables them to avoid the painful realities of their lives.

It is my belief that the drug problem is only a symptom of a sickness that pervades our entire society. Drug education can be thought of as a treatment that is designed to treat the symptom without doing anything about the causes of the illness. Whether it is an effective treatment is far from proven. But even more distressing, by relying upon education as a symptomatic treatment, we are lured away from the real problems which are causing the symptom. Drug education programs can be helpful. But unless supported by a firm commitment to examine and deal with the more basic causes of human despair, they are nothing but a "cop out".



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